

# Chapter 17

## Stockholm: Innovative Ways of Supporting Children of Single (Lone) Mothers

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### 17.1 Introduction

Innovation within the field of social welfare is a recently awoken interest in the Swedish context. Innovations have been, and are still, very much related to the launching of new products, inventions and technical development. Welfare development has, by tradition, not been considered as innovative (Rønning et al. 2013). Innovation has also mainly been related to the private—for-profit—sector and, since the development of the welfare state in the mid-1900s, the field of welfare in Sweden has been dominated by services produced by the public sector. However, there is awakening political interest in social innovations and social investments, both at national and local levels. This development is taking place in a changing welfare context with structural changes in terms of deregulation and privatisation. These changes have opened up opportunities for alternative producers of welfare services (see e.g. Svedberg and Olsson 2010). Moreover, with strained budgets and unsolved social problems, local and central governments are looking to the for-profit and the non-profit sectors for innovations and entrepreneurial initiatives (Carrigan and Nordfeldt 2013, WP5).

In this chapter, we describe an innovative project developed within a civil society organisation named *Fryshuset*. The local context for this innovation is the city of Stockholm in Sweden. Stockholm can be described as a growing city with a strong labour market of, for example, advanced businesses and information and communications technology (ICT). (OECD 2006). Compared with the rest of the country,

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Stockholm stands out as having the highest rates of employment and highest activity rate and gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (Hermelin 2011).

On the other hand, Stockholm is struggling with many problems similar to other large cities in Europe, for example, housing shortage, homelessness, segregation and social exclusion. A fast growing population puts enormous pressure on the housing market, and the construction of new housing has not kept pace with this demand, which has led to a severe housing shortage in the whole Stockholm region (Länsstyrelsen 2012; Boverket 2012).

The high employment rate does not apply to the whole population. Unemployment rates for young people are substantially higher than for the older groups, and young adults are increasingly employed on temporary contracts. This is also the case for inhabitants born abroad and especially for migrants from countries outside the European Union/European Free Trade Association (EU/EFTA; Nordfeldt 2012, WP3). Among the young unemployed, there is a group at risk of long-term exclusion from the labour market and consequently at risk of deprivation and problematic living conditions (Angelin 2010). This is the group of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). The NEET group is, in comparison to many other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, relatively small in Sweden. However, the group is still significant and over-represented in certain areas in the city of Stockholm (Arbetsförmedlingen 2013). These young people, at the risk of social exclusion, are a main target group for the organisation *Fryshuset* that will be further described below.

### **Diversity and Choice—Catchwords in the Local Political Debate**

Deregulation and legislation on competitive procurement (LOU), ideas of “user choice” and a new legislation—the Law on Freedom of Choice (Lagen om valfrihet, LOV)—have made it possible for municipalities to engage alternative service providers in social welfare. In Stockholm, the governing right-wing majority, which was in power between 2006 and 2014, pursued a strong policy of marketisation and privatisation.

This development could serve as a window of opportunities for innovation (cf. Ahrne and Papakostas 2002). Still, there does not seem to be any outspoken interest in ideas of social innovation among politicians and other local stakeholders in Stockholm. This lack of interest may appear somewhat contradictory considering the strong emphasis on diversity and consumer choice described above. So far, this has primarily been implemented by private businesses (and, to a more limited degree, civil society organisations), being involved within the field of health care, social services (primarily within elderly care) and the housing market (Segnestam Larsson and Carrigan 2013, WP4).

In the local political debate, there seems to be agreement across the political scale regarding the role of civil society in local welfare, that is, as long as the discussion does not comprise civil society actors in relation to privatisation of social welfare. The issue of alternative actors producing welfare services is subject to political disagreements that follow the traditional political lines with, for example, political parties on the right side of the spectrum for alternative organisations, such as private

and civil society organisations, while the political parties on the left prefer publically funded and publically produced welfare services (Segnestam Larsson and Carrigan 2013, WP4). Between the local government and civil society organisations (CSOs) working in the field of social welfare, a “compact” has been formulated and agreed upon. The aim of the compact is to serve as a platform for dialogue and cooperation between the local authorities and CSOs. There are pronounced expectations on the civil society to play an active part in the renewal of social welfare (Segnestam Larsson and Carrigan 2013). There seems thus to be some ambivalence inherent in this interest when, at the same time, the procurement of services from CSOs are very limited compared to private businesses.

## 17.2 Children of Single (Lone) Mothers (Barn till Ensamma Mammor)

The project, Children of Single (Lone) Mothers, was developed as an activity within in the frame of the foundation Fryshuset, headed by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). When Fryshuset started in Stockholm in 1984, it was located in a former cold storage building (hence the name Fryshuset, meaning “cold storage” in Swedish). The creation of the organisation can be seen as a response to young people’s needs.

During its lifetime, Fryshuset has become a well-known and entrepreneurial organisation with a wide range of different activities. Today, Fryshuset runs schools and social programs as well as vocational training and seminars and conferences. Further, it also runs courses in theatre, music, sport, hosting events, concerts, parties and discotheques. Public funding covers around 5% of the activities, and the rest is financed by a mixture of grants, endowments and fees for services such as educational and social programs (fees that are not paid by young people or individual clients but by cooperational partners and government agencies). Fryshuset also runs activities in Malmö and Gothenburg. Throughout its lifetime, Fryshuset has worked to find new and innovative solutions to social youth issues and problems. Within the organisation, new projects have constantly been started. Fryshuset also cooperates with a range of public and private actors (Engel et al. [forthcoming](#)).

Since 2007, Fryshuset has run a project addressed at children of single mothers in Stockholm. Since then, this project has also been started in Malmö and in Gothenburg. The focus for this activity is the children, but indirectly the activity also affects the mothers. And, as a part of this activity, Fryshuset offers parent education and different kinds of lectures for the mothers. The aim is to support and strengthen children that are living with a single mother in economically vulnerable circumstances. Fryshuset describes the support as being provided from a health perspective with focus on the children’s and the mothers’ everyday situation and especially wellbeing. This concept is based on Aaron Antonovsky’s thinking of *saluto genesis* and the importance for the individual of a *sense of coherence* (see Antonovsky 1987).

It can be argued that this activity has been developed in a clearing (see Segnestam Larsson et al., Chap. 6) identified by Fryshuset in the social landscape, including support for single mothers and their children. The approach on health and empowerment offers a complementary activity to social services based on legislation and more acute problem-solving. The focus on both children and their mothers is also unique to this project.

### 17.2.1 *Internal Characteristics*

The goal of the project is to provide positive childhood memories to children living in vulnerable situations of different kinds—economically, socially or being victims of abuse. This is based on a belief in all children's right to play, laugh and to be seen. A ground for this work is the Children's Convention (UN 1989). Ultimately, the objective is to enhance the children's sense of self-esteem and confidence.

In practice, three types of activities are offered to single mothers and their children. The first is the *monthly meetings*. On normal occasions, the participation number in a meeting is around 100 persons. At the monthly meetings, mothers and children form separate groups. The group of mothers can, for example, participate in lectures concerning aspects of health, during which they will also have time to network and support one another. Meanwhile, the group of children is divided according to age and take part in sports, arts or music workshops together with volunteers—so called “amigos”—in the project (interview).

The fundamental idea behind these monthly meetings is that children living in situations of vulnerability need to have somewhere where they can enjoy themselves and laugh without thinking about, and taking responsibility for, the family, which is not uncommon that they do. In the project, the children can try out different activities, for example, different kinds of sports. The project provides suggestions on creative activities that are not costly. The ultimate idea of the project is joy, says the project leader, “we are good at joy” (interview). She continues explaining that the project wants to give these children positive childhood memories. “The children can come here and know that they don't have to look after their mothers while they're here, which is something that the staff experience a lot”. According to her, children behave according to their mothers' state of mind and do not allow themselves to feel happy. At the project, it works the other way around as well; single mothers with total responsibility for their children can take a “break” or time to just sit and relax for a while, knowing that the child is having a great time in the other room (interview).

The second activity offered by the project is called “activities”. The idea with these activities is to take the whole group, mothers and children together, to do something out of the ordinary. This can be visits to museums, a public swimming pool, a fun park or a zoo. An example in Stockholm is a visit in the summertime to a large zoo about 3 h away from the city. Six filled buses went from Fryshuset to the zoo at the same time. The visit took some effort to organise: “We have become

experts at arranging events” the project leader states. The main idea behind these activities is to build up and support the relationship between mother and child. The project leader argues that in the child’s view these activities are things their mothers take them to do, without having to think about the cost, and this is a way to build up the role of the mother in the eyes of the child. In these activities also, the children can see their mothers laugh and have a good time. This part of the project is costly and the three people employed in the project have worked out a special way of fundraising. The staff offer lectures to companies and invite them to co-organise these events with them. In that way, the companies will experience how the funds have been used and it can create some added value for the companies (interview).

The third activity at Children of Single (Lone) Mothers is called the “boomerang meetings”. This is a part of the project that has been going through many changes and had, by the time of the study, reached a form that the project staff was very pleased with. At the beginning of the project, the staff received many calls from mothers having all kinds of problems. These could be related to legal issues of custody matters, or health, or questions about how the social services function and act, and often these were questions that the three project leaders did not have the competence to answer. This resulted in an idea to arrange a fair twice a year where they invited experts from different fields and institutions to come and give personal counselling to the mothers. For many of the mothers, this meeting can be a first step to establishing a relationship with the appropriate institution. During these and all meetings, the project invites volunteers. The project leader explains that she and her two colleagues could not possibly meet all the needs and answer all the questions of the participants. The volunteers are called “fellow human beings” in the project and they are there to support the mothers during meetings (interview). Different kinds of advice are also given on the Internet. Persons can pose questions on the project’s webpage.

Beside these activities, the staff does a lot of work “behind the scenes”. They give lectures and try to represent and make visible the group of children of single mothers. “There is much to be done to make people recognize the problems of these children”, the project leader states (interview). The special method of fundraising, mentioned above is also a way to make more actors recognise this group. The project has also recently initiated cooperation with a university college in the Stockholm area, where they give lectures to university students who are studying to become teachers. Here, the project leader sees a good opportunity for influencing the general view of this group of children (interview).

The mothers that participate in the activities become members (free of charge) of the activity. At the time of the case study, there were just over 1000 members in Stockholm. Only single mothers can attend. The reason for this is that there are mothers among the participants who live with a protected identity and risk feeling threatened if men participate in the activities.

At the time of the study, three persons were working in the project. This staff had developed skills as “event experts” and they organise most of the target group’s activities. Beside a grant from the local government, the staff needs to raise funds and apply for allowances, from, for example, different kinds of foundations. Volunteers

were engaged in the project as so-called “amigos”, who attend to the children, and “fellow humans”, who support the mothers. Fundraising and advocacy are important responsibilities taken on by the project staff, and both responsibilities seem to fertilise the other.

### **17.2.2 Dealing with Local Context**

There are elements of advocacy in this project. There is an ambition to raise attention to the issue of child poverty and the situation for unemployed or low-income single mothers. The staff at Fryshuset implements this in different ways, for example, by cooperation with a university college and by giving lectures and seminars to different stakeholders, including private companies and politicians.

When talking about these issues with politicians, the project staff is experiencing a lack of knowledge of these families’ situations and, sometimes, prejudices, considering situations to be self-induced. By making this group visible, there is an ambition in the project to contribute to long-term changes for the target group, concerning both the children and the mothers.

The project also concerns the question of more flexible opening hours within the childcare, which is an issue on the local political agenda in Stockholm. The possibility of working “uncomfortable hours” is stressed by several political parties and pointed out as important for single parents. This means childcare should be open in the evenings, at nights and even weekends (Segnestam Larsson and Carrigan 2013, WP4). Childcare in the evenings and at nights could be an important basis for single mothers to get a job, though many jobs in occupations that are still female dominated, within health and social care, for example, have uncomfortable working hours.

Another field of advocacy for the target group is the discussion about the national norm of social welfare benefits, which today includes neither leisure time activities for children (for example, fees for sport or music lessons) nor monthly internet costs. This latter could mean that some children cannot receive information sent out from their schools or from other organisations that communicate mostly through the Internet.

## **17.3 Concluding Remarks**

*Children of Single (Lone) Mothers* is an example of an innovation initiated within the civil society by an organisation acknowledged for its entrepreneurial ways of working. Fryshuset is a Stockholm-based organisation but with networks and contacts in municipalities in different parts of Sweden. As described above, the Swedish welfare system has been opened up to alternative producers of welfare services. A parallel development is that during the last few decades civil society organisations have attracted growing interest and have been granted greater legitimacy from both

state and local governments. However, this has only to a limited degree resulted in a growing rate of social services produced by CSOs. But there are political expectations on CSOs to deliver new solutions for unsolved social problems and help to strengthen the welfare system by filling gaps.

One might argue, though, that the project *Children of Single (Lone) Mothers* is in line with traditional roles and expectations of a CSO, which also have been strengthened during the latest decades, namely to focus on new needs and new groups with needs that are not covered in other ways. The foundation Fryshuset has taken on this role in relation to vulnerable youth since the mid-1980s. They have served as pioneers and offered services that are not covered by the public sector (Engel et al. [forthcoming](#)).

The working in the project is based on the methods developed in Fryshuset—advocacy for their target group, direct services and also with the aim of empowerment, which in this project is implemented by the advice given in boomerang meetings. The mix of funding for the project and the cooperation with different stakeholders are also in line with the overall ways in which Fryshuset works.

The project has been subject to some diffusion, which is also in line with the ambitions of Fryshuset. During the organisation's nearly 30-year lifetime, the organisation has had the motivation to spread its know-how and methods to other municipalities. This has partly succeeded, but there have also been many obstacles to spreading locally initiated activities to other places and stakeholders. Fryshuset's answer to the problem of diffusion has been to build networks with local entrepreneurial actors and initiatives (Engel [forthcoming](#)).

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